

Reason and Rationality in the Qur'an

BY IBRAHIM KALIN



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Foreword

by PAUL-A. HARDY
New York, USA

THE ESSAY BEFORE US WAS first presented as a keynote address during the Second Muslim–Catholic Forum on Reason, Faith and the Human Person, held at the Baptistal Site in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in November 2011. It represents a step in an ongoing dialogue between representatives of Islam and those of the Roman Catholic Church, the largest of the Christian sects. The outstanding feature of Dr. Ibrahim Kalin’s position is its subsumption of reason, a main theme of the forum, into a larger metaphysical context, which transcends the major thrust of modern rationalism. He centers this move in the Qur’an and thereby transcends the debate between intellectualist rationalism and voluntarism, the framework in which previous dialogue was initiated by Pope Benedict XVI in his January 2006 address “Faith, Reason and the University” before the University of Regensburg. For this reason, it has been decided to republish Dr. Kalin’s *Reason and Rationality in the Qur’an* as an independent piece in order to ensure its circulation to a wider audience.

It is in the light of Pope Benedict XVI’s 2006 address that Kalin’s intervention is to be read. The latter asserts that “motivated by religious zeal, most medieval Christians considered Islam to be against reason and saw it as grounded in blind faith”. An initial difficulty is that the reader of the Pope’s address is left wondering whether interreligious dialogue has moved much beyond the vision that Kalin attributes to those Christians, namely that the “Muslim faith . . . appealed to [the] flesh, the lowest part of the human being”. The idea is that Islam appeals not to the soul, the locus of faith and reason, but to the body, the locus of passion and violence. For example, the Papal Regensburg address declared:

But for Muslim teaching, God is absolutely transcendent. His will is not bound up with any of our categories, even that of rationality. Here Khoury quotes a work of the noted French Islamist R. Arnaldez, who points out that Ibn Hazm went so far as to state that God is not bound even by His word, and that nothing would oblige Him to reveal the truth to us.¹

However, the address mentions Manuel II Paleologus, whose recorded response in a debate with a Muslim states:

God is not pleased by blood—and not acting reasonably (*sun logo*) is contrary to God’s nature. Faith is born of the soul, not the body. Whoever would lead someone to

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, “Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections” (speech, University of Regensburg, Bavaria, September 12, 2006).

faith needs the ability to speak well and to reason properly, without violence and threats . . . To convince a reasonable soul, one does not need a strong arm of weapons of any kind, or any other means of threatening a person with death.²

Pope Benedict, that is, sees a connection between arbitrary violence and what he describes as the voluntarism espoused by Islam.

That voluntarism is a questionable doctrine. It is true but what is questionable about it affects voluntarist models of deity in general. Its problematic nature affects the Christian Duns Scotus and William of Ockham as well as Muslim Ibn Hazm al-Andalusi. Such thinkers represent the extreme of arbitrary *fiat* and rigid deontologism. Their problem, as I would state it, is this. Whilst voluntarism officially ascribes qualities of autonomy and heteronomy to numerically distinct moral persons: God, on the one hand, and human beings, on the other, their theology provides no conceptual barrier to human personalities being affected by the Divine Personality. Led by voluntarism human beings subject themselves to a completely autonomous divine will, in some mysterious fashion, and wind up attempting to participate in that divine autonomy. The voluntarist doctrine explicitly denies that such participation is possible. Nevertheless, they almost always attempt to vicariously live the life of the deity they posit as an object of worship. The result is that a human moral personality molded in voluntarism eventually tends to project itself onto the surrounding environment in an effort to externalize itself and thus gain purchase on its own self-comprehension.

The solution of the problem in this case, according to the Pope, is to be found in the theologies of Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas. Following their lead, he proposes a theology that enjoins “acting reasonably” or more literally “acting with Logos”. He means acting in accordance with God’s nature insofar as it is revealed by the Logos or Second Person of the Trinity. He thus avails himself of the universal validity of the Logos interpreted as reason as well as word. In this way, he keeps his audience from forgetting the particular intervention of Logos as Christ, since he asserts “not to . . . act with Logos is contrary to the nature of God”. He thus envisions “Logos” as identical to the Divine Substance. In other words, God is a rational substance in which human reason participates through divine favor or grace vouchsafed by the Incarnation.

In sum, Pope Benedict feels obliged to take the side of the Christian intellectualist against its voluntarist tradition represented by Scotus and Ockham. On the Augustinian and Thomist model, God and man stand in a cognitive relation to the *bonum intellectum*—the rational good—which in both cases is independent of their wills. Neither God nor man makes anything good by willing or choosing it. For both the goodness of an end to an action is warranted by rational insight into the very nature of the being whose end it is. It is true that God’s cognition is as perfect as man’s is defective and partial. Nevertheless, human beings are subject to the will of God only to the extent that they order their actions to a divine will which it actions to ends created by the divine intellect. Although the theme of intellectualism versus voluntarism permeates Muslim discussion in kalam (dialectical theology), Pope Benedict mysteriously chooses to locate Islam *in toto* on the side of voluntarism and overlooks a host of Muslim figures whose positions compliment his own. There is, for example, the intellectualism of the Muʿtazila movement whose influence survives within today’s Shiʿi Islam. Muʿtazilism was countered by Abu al-Hasan

² Ibid.

al-Ash‘ari (d. 260/935), whose creedal pronouncements are in fact espoused by Sunni majority. Certainly his emphasis on divine omnipotence makes him a good representative of voluntarism, even if the position he originally put forward becomes more nuanced as it unfolds in the theological reflections of some of his followers, most particularly Abu Hamid al-Ghazali.

Certainly, the Qur’an may be taken to rule in favor of voluntarism when it says, “He [sc. God] is doer (*fa‘alun*) of what He wills (*yurid*)” (85:16), and this affirms the divine attribute of the will (*irada*), to be sure.³ Verses like this seem to bolster the Pope’s take on Islam. Admittedly, the verse does not imply that will is what God is in His Essence. And al-Ash‘ari would grant as much. Still, that does not entirely exculpate him in the eyes of many who believe that al-Ash‘ari and his followers overstate the case for divine omnipotence. This is perhaps true of many representatives of Shi‘ism even today.

There is then much in Islamic theology as there is in Christian theology to make Pope Benedict’s point. At the same time, one feels forced to speak in defense of the Qur’an and complain. For at times al-Ash‘ari still fails to present God according to His full image in that sacred text, since the Qur’an stresses above all divine goodness under the attributes of Infinite Mercy (*al-Rahman*) and Compassion (*al-Rahim*). It is al-Ash‘ari’s failure, on this score, which causes him to walk down a steep incline, one from where he could easily slip into a moral vacuum populated only by a divinity distinguished for nothing else save his unintelligible and incalculable willfulness. Now the advantage of the essay to follow is that it moves us beyond this theological controversy, exemplified in Latin scholasticism and Muslim kalam or dialectical theology.

Now before Christianity had come on the scene, even with Plato sacred truths once expressed in the oracular and poetic pronouncements of the Pre-Socratics began to shift toward the essentially secular and profane idiom of scientific discourse; that tendency became even more pronounced with Aristotle. “With him,” Pierre Aubenque observes, “the Logos ceases to be prophetic . . . and . . . is defined as dialectical discourse” and becomes “at best professorial discourse”. This was the situation that the Carolingian forebears of today’s Roman Catholicism found when they adopted Platonizing Latin Augustinianism as their primary medium of theological expression. For Latin and St. Augustine became the initial framework of Romano-Carolingian theology, not the Greek of the Septuagint and New Testament, which had held dominance since Christian beginning. This was followed by the ascendancy of Aristotelianism, introduced from Muslim Spain, in Thomas Aquinas. In the period of scholasticism the Logos, which had become “at best professorial discourse”, reached a new apex. With that, theology was relaunched on a new footing. Logic came into ascendancy and the allusion to Logos in “*theo-logia*” became more or less identified with Aristotelian logic.

In Islam, however, the Logos, or the two terms *kalima* and *nutq* used in Arabic to convey its meaning, never ceases to be prophetic. There is the Arabic dictum—“Philosophy springs from the niche of prophecy (*yanbu‘ al-hikma min mishkat al-nubuwwa*)”. “*Hikma*”, which literally means wisdom, is one of the words used to translate the Greek *philosophia* or “love of wisdom”. Except, *hikma* in this context goes beyond professorial discourse. For “prophecy” (*nubuwwa*), that is, the Qur’an calls itself *hikma baligha*—“a communicative wisdom”. The implication is that “rationality . . . takes place in a communicative and

³ A sentiment voiced also in Psalm 135:6: “Whatsoever the Lord pleased, that did He in heaven, and in earth, in the seas, and all deep places.”

intersubjective context”, a point to which Kalin draws our attention. In other words, *hikma* can be communicated to others through language and rational arguments. At the same time wisdom remains irreducible to the category of modern *ratio*, the main instrument of natural science.

Kalin, by taking his stand on the theme of reason as it presents itself in the Qur’an, sidesteps the conflict between intellectualists and voluntarists upon which Pope Benedict centers his discussion. Recall, intellectualism holds that God’s Essence, that is, His Being, is an *intellectum bonum*, which cannot be subordinated to the attributes of His power and thus His will. But voluntarism maintains that God’s will cannot be limited by His Essence or Being, since it would mean that God obligates Himself to us by being obliged to act in accordance with human reason.

The present essay moves beyond this impasse to the arena of divine sapience. After all, it is undeniable that God obligates Himself to man in virtue of man’s sapience. Before al-Ash’ari, the great moralist and preacher al-Hasan al-Basri (d. 110/728) had already made an argument along these lines. “Our God,” he reasoned, “is too just and too fair to blind a man and then say to him, ‘See! or else I shall punish you’; or to render him deaf and then say, ‘Hear! or I shall punish you’; or to strike him dumb and then say, ‘Speak! or else I shall punish you.’”⁴ Does not the same apply to the command “Know!”? Does it not presuppose a capacity for cognition in man? If this is true, why would God create a faculty of cognition in human beings? And given that it is impossible to know what is false or nonexistent, where there is knowledge there must be truth as well. The two are thus linked: He owes this subordination of His will to man’s sapience first and foremost because He owes it to Himself as the bearer of the attribute—*al-Hakim* (the Wise) and *Ahkam al-Hakimin* (the Wisest of the Wise). So much is revealed in the Qur’an.

The Ash’ari Abu Hamid al-Ghazali was one of the theologians most at pains to call attention to this fact and emphasized how the divine sapience or wisdom pervades every aspect of God’s creation. Commenting upon the divine quality *‘adl* (justice) in his treatise on the divine names, *The Highest Aim in Glossing the Meanings of the Beautiful Divine Names*, al-Ghazali observed: “God arranges them [sc. all things] in their appropriate places and thereby He is just (*‘adl*).”⁵ This alliance between wisdom and justice is repeated by Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (d. 333/944), the eponymous founder of another school of *usul al-din*, who countered Mu’tazili intellectualism with his doctrine of “*isaba*”, in which he called attention to the essential rightness in God’s disposition to place everything in its proper place.⁶

But al-Ghazali famously establishes a virtual axiom of his theology, the principle “there is nothing in possibility more wondrous than what is”. He argues, “If there were [i.e., if a more amazing world were possible] and God withheld, having power to do it, but deigning not to do so, this would be stinginess contrary to divine generosity (*jud*) and injustice contrary to divine justice. But if He were not able, it would be an incapacity contrary to Divinity [itself].”⁷ In other words, at the heart of his theology is the ontological intuition of being—“what is”. The first object, according to Avicenna as well as Aquinas and Duns Scotus, is man’s intellect or *‘aql*.

⁴ Helmut Ritter, “Studien zur Geschichte der islamischen Frömmigkeit I. Ḥasan al-Baṣrī”, *Der Islam* 21 (1933): 74.

⁵ Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *al-Maqsad al-asna fi sharh ma’ani asma’ al-ilah al-husna* (Beirut: Dar al-Mashriq, 1406/1986), 105.

⁶ Abu Mansur al-Maturidi, *Kitab al-tauhid*, ed. Fathalla Kholeif (Beirut: Dar al-Mashriq, 1390/1970), 97.

⁷ Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Ihya’ ‘ulum al-din* (Cairo: Matba’at al-Amiriyya, 1334/1916), 4:223.

Except, “intellect” (*‘aql*) is in Arabic, here, and therefore the Islamic context must always differ from the *intellectus* and ratio of Latin scholasticism as Kalin will explain in the following pages. But in an important treatise, which Grand Imam of al-Azhar Dr. Ahmad al-Tayyib brought to public attention in a critical edition, the point is also made.⁸ The treatise is the “Essay on the Intellect” (i.e., *al-Risala fi al-‘aql*) by the Jewish philosopher Abu al-Barakat al-Baghdadi. In this small work, he observes, as Kalin also reminds us, that *‘aql* signifies the act of drawing rein upon an unruly beast. From the same root, in fact, Arabs form the word *‘iqal*, the device employed in hobbling a camel. Abu al-Barakat explains in his Book of Reflection (*Kitab al-mu‘tabar*):

In their language [that of the Arabs] this inhibitor (*al-mani‘*), deterrent (*al-sad*), and preventative is called “*‘aql*” because it restrains, deters, and prevents a person from whatever action he is set upon doing. It is a restraint and shackle just as fetters are for camels and horses when they hinder the free movement of their bodily members from going in any direction.⁹

From this Abu al-Barakat claims, “I saw that the term *‘aql* refers in Arabic to practical reason . . . practical intellect reins in the soul and keeps it from unrestrained behavior dictated by the exigencies of its nature.” But “what the Greeks mean by intellect [i.e., *nous*] is the general idea of theoretical science”.¹⁰

In other words, the term *‘aql* by itself alone includes an orientation towards action, missing in “*intellectus*”. Indeed, it can suggest the creative action of God in bringing about the cosmos. However, as the Mu‘tazili theologian Abu ‘Ali Muhammad al-Jubba‘i (d. ca. 303/915) points out, it would be inappropriate to describe God as *‘aql* because the idea involves restriction and, therefore, implied a limitation on God’s part. Nevertheless, the Ash‘ari theologian Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 606/1209) speaks of “active cognition” (*‘ilm fi‘li*), when describing God’s creative activity, distinguishing it from “passive cognition” (*‘ilm infi‘ali*). He derives the distinction from Avicenna, who claimed that whilst some forms in the human intellect are impressed upon it from natural objects in the external world like the sky, others are prior in the sense that they arise in the intellect itself. These latter exemplify “active cognition” and al-Razi likens it to the activity of a geometer who constructs a figure.

Activities of the kind that al-Razi apparently has in mind are nonobservational in the sense in which G. E. M. Anscombe put forth in her pioneering work *Intention*. All human action cannot be accounted for in terms of feedback provided by calculative reasoning. When a skilled musician, for example, plays a passage with many short notes in rapid succession, feedback cannot account for his skill because nervous conduction is too slow to give him or her feedback of his or her own playing. The musician’s skill is then unlike al-Razi’s passive cognition and is more like the divine skill employed in God’s creation and general economy (*tadbir*) of the universe.

Apposite here is the comment of Shah Waliullah al-Dihlawi (d. 1176/1762), who lived in Delhi in eighteenth-century India, the same period of the European Enlightenment. “God,” he said, “has three attributes with respect to bringing the world into existence, each presupposing the other: *al-mubdi‘* (the Originator), *al-khaliq* (the Creator), and

⁸ Ahmad al-Tayyib, “Un Traité d’Abu l-Barakat al-Baghdadi Sur L’Intellect”, *Annales Islamologiques* 16 (1980): 127–47.

⁹ Abu al-Barakat al-Baghdadi, *Kitab al-mu‘tabar*, ed. Serefittin Yaltkaya (Hyderabad: Osmania Publication Bureau, 1357–8/1938–9): 2:409.

¹⁰ Ibid.

al-mudabbir (the Manager). The first derives from absolute origination or creation from nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*). The second, *al-khaliq*, pertains to the creation of the material world. “The third of these attributes,” he writes, “is the divine economy (*tadbir*) or management of the world of generated being, and this goes back to giving an account of worldly events that conform to a system to which His divine wisdom approves, with a view to the general welfare demanded by divine generosity.”¹¹

To capture the character of *tadbir*, which Shah Waliullah apparently has in mind, we can do no better than the example of a chess master, who without looking at the board, plays a score of opponents simultaneously: his knowledge of chess is so vastly superior to theirs that he can deal with any moves they are going to make, and he has no need to improvise or deliberate. That is, calculative or instrumental reason or ratio described by Kalin in the forthcoming pages has no place in accounting for the chess master’s skill. Similarly, it has no place in divine economy or *tadbir*. The latter is a changeless and active cognition, governing the whole course of creation in the way Anscombe describes nonobservational action. It is analogous to the rational process displayed in our own skilled performances.

It thus resembles what Avicenna called “simple cognition” or *‘aql basit*, known in Latin scholasticism as “*scientia simplex*”. It often occurs when someone is questioned about a matter never thought about previously. Yet, that person becomes aware of his or her capacity to deliver an answer. But as the answer is given it emerges in a step-by-step fashion, although it originally occurred in *totum simul* fashion. Again, nervous conduction in the brain is too slow to offer feedback. It is, of course, possible to read what emerges in step-by-step fashion back into the original simple cognition. This is often done and delivers the impression of calculative reason, that the will has special acts of its own. And this may eventually suggest that it enjoys a priority over rational insight. Or, intellectualists may conclude that God’s knowledge is of an observational character. In any case, the idea can emerge that God knows *x* on the one hand, and wills *x* on the other.

From the separation of divine volition and intellection into two separate acts with distinct objects the problem of priority of divine volition over divine cognition or vice-versa comes into view. Avicenna, however, likened God’s creative knowledge to *‘aql basit*.¹² And this suggests a different approach to divine volition and knowledge, different, that is, from the approach displayed in the kalam debates between intellectualism and voluntarism. What is significant is that Avicenna’s approach is consonant with the meaning of *‘aql* as it is found in the Arabic language. At least, this is the case, if we follow Abu al-Barakat’s analysis. For according to him *‘aql* in its real meaning is never quite *nous theoretikos* observation or rather contemplative in character nor is it purely *nous praktikos*, that is, reasoning directed by the will. Whilst the Greeks and Latins saw two distinct menal faculties, *‘aql* really is a single faculty, which Abu al-Barakat would go on to make a single faculty of conscious awareness (*shu‘ur*). A philosopher like Avicenna can thus portray rational insight as implicitly geared towards acts of creation.

Now Latin scholasticism picked up on the idea that divine cognition is of a creative character in just the way Avicenna describes—*scientia Dei, causa rerum*—as we read in his *Glosses*: “The First (sc. God) knows all things just as they are because the cause of their existence is His knowledge of them.”¹³

¹¹ On this important idea in Shah Waliullah, see J. M. S. Baljon, *Religion and Thought of Shāh Walī Allāh Dihlāwī: 1703–1762* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986), 23, 30, 37, 42, 49, 53–5.

¹² See Avicenna, *Ta’liqat*, ed. A. Badawi (Cairo: al-Hay’a al-Misriyya al-‘Amma li al-Kitab, 1392/1973), 116.

¹³ Abu ‘Alī Ibn Sina, *Kitab al-ta’liqat* (Cairo: al-Hay’a al-Misriyya al-‘Amma li al-Kitab, 1393/1973), 156.

But then this is also the path Kalin takes in his remarkable intervention into the ongoing Muslim–Catholic dialogue. His contribution resides first and foremost in his willingness to explore the possibility of an approach based upon nothing less than the Qur’an itself. That is, he explores that possibility with words like *‘aql*, words which the Qur’an uses to depict the role of reason within the human predicament. On such a plane, discussion transcends the theological speculations that followed in the wake of its revelation. The second achievement of Kalin’s intervention is perhaps less apparent but no less important than the first. To detect it we must remind ourselves that Christianity had prototypes for theological speculation already in place in the text of John’s Gospel, for example, and the Pauline Epistles. Dionysius the Areopagite, Symeon the New Theologian, Gregory Palamas, and others followed and were inspired by these prototypes. In the Orthodox Church, they are considered theologians in the truest sense as opposed to mere manufacturers of professorial discourse carried out by state-paid schoolmen.

Islam, however, has no sacred prototype of this nature to inspire its dialectical theology or *kalam*. In fact, *kalam* in many ways marks a break with the world of the Qur’an. Hence, the legitimacy of *dialectical theology* has remained an open question throughout the history of Islamic thought. For *kalam* is often rejected by traditionalists and mystics alike. In consequence, it would be unfair to compare Christian and Muslim theology. Their respective roles in their respective religions are simply not equivalent. What corresponds best to Roman Catholic theology in Islam are the five legal schools. For one can be a Hanafi or Ja’fari and deny Mu’tazilism, or be Shafi’i and regard Ash’arism as an unwarranted innovation (*bid’a*). Yet, it has proven difficult to practice Islam for as long as the Sharia (Islamic law) was in force without belonging to one legal school or the other. Yet, the chief source (*asl*) of discovery of the laws of Islam is the Qur’an and is acceptable to all alike. By focusing on the Qur’an, Kalin has shown a way to engage in interreligious dialogue without presenting Islam in an unfair light. At the same time, he has managed to lift that dialogue beyond controversies inspired by issues raised by modernity, the Enlightenment, and adverse theological polemic.

Reason and Rationality in the Qur'an

by DR. IBRAHIM KALIN

Introduction

THIS PAPER IS BASED ON A SIMPLE ARGUMENT: far from being a self-standing entity, reason functions within a larger context of existence, intelligibility, and moral thinking. It articulates as much as discloses the reality of things. Rationality arises within a context of meaning and significance that goes beyond the internal workings of the individual human mind. As a situated and engaged reality, reason by itself is neither a principle nor ground of knowledge, truth nor rationality because our epistemic encounter with the world takes place in a wider context of ontological relations and significance. Furthermore, the conceptual and linguistic affiliates of the word *'aql*, which make up a long list of interrelated epistemic terms, present a matrix of thinking wider than calculative and discursive rationality can account for. The Qur'an treats reason and rationality in such a wider context of thinking.

Any notion of rationality that can properly be called "Islamic" operates in the context of what I call the metaphysics of creation, which states that the world has been created by an intelligent God for a purpose. It begins with the premise that the world has a beginning and end and that "*all shall perish except His [God's] Face*" (Qur'an 28:88). The beginning (*al-mabda'*) and the end or "return" to God (*al-ma'ad*) lays out a scope and horizon for our rational deliberations and moral choices. Like the universe, human beings have been created for a purpose whose fulfillment is not possible within the confines of a subjectivist ontology of human reason. The work of reason takes place against the backdrop of an ontology of rationality that links human beings to other human beings on the one hand, and to God and the universe on the other.

As God's intelligent work, the world of creation reflects His creative power. Given that God creates optimally and always for a purpose, the universe has an order and intelligibility built into it. Truth, when properly accessed, is the "disclosure" of this intrinsic order and intelligibility, which God as the Creator has bestowed upon existence. When reason investigates natural phenomena and the universe, it seeks out this order and intelligibility in them because without order, structure, and intelligibility we cannot know anything. To name something, without which we cannot perceive the world, means giving it a proper place and signification in the order of things. A nonsubjectivist ontology of reason, which the Qur'an advocates, construes rationality as disclosing the principles of intelligibility derived from the intrinsic qualities of the order of existence. "Rationality as intelligibility" is thus markedly different from the current notions of instrumental rationality, which

reduces the function of reason, the most fundamental trait of being human, to making logical use of available means to reach our stated ends.¹

Rationality is then a function of existence and thinking and takes place in a communicative and intersubjective context. To say that something is intelligible means that it has a certain order and structure by which we can understand it. It also means that since it is intelligible, it can be communicated to others through language and rational arguments. This intersubjective context of rationality, which the Qur'an emphasizes on various occasions, places reason and rationality above the solitary work of a solipsistic and disengaged mind. Just as we humans are part of a larger reality, our thinking functions within a larger context of intelligibility. Using the plural form, the Qur'an explains its verses to a "*tribe, nation, or community (qawm) who thinks*" and chastises "*those who do not use their reason*" (see, for instance, 2:164; 5:58; 13:4; 16:12). From disclosing the intrinsic intelligibility of things to intercultural relations, rationality emerges in a network of relations and connections that go beyond the internal procedures of the human mind.

Subsuming reason within a larger context of existence goes against the main thrust of modern rationalism. Ever since the European Enlightenment adapted its "baptism of reason" against the alleged irrationality of the Middle Ages, reason has declared its independence and developed a view of itself as the ultimate *arche* and *ens realissimum* of reality. In an age in which rationality is measured by quantifiable properties and computerized decisions, the ontological foundations of reason have radically changed, and highly idealized and eventually inhuman forms of rationality have been identified as the basis of human intelligence. In contrast to the notion of rationality as computerization, however, our most unique human quality called reason, the very quality that distinguishes us from the rest of creation and clearly privileges us over them (Qur'an 17:70), functions essentially and primarily in a qualitative and axiological context. Charges of "irrationality" and dogmatism have been launched against Islam in part because the concept of rationality as developed in the Islamic intellectual tradition contravenes the main thrust of modern and postmodern notions of rationality that have arisen in the West since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Motivated by religious zeal, most medieval Christians considered Islam to be against reason and saw it as grounded in blind faith, ignorance, violence, and worldly pleasures. The Muslim faith attracted many followers, it was argued, not because it offered convincing arguments but because it appealed to their flesh, the lowest part of the human being. Furthermore, Islam endorsed violence on non-Muslims to convert them because it could not have produced rational arguments to convince the nonbeliever. Use of violence and declaration of jihad against non-Muslims showed how irrational Islam was, and how Islamic faith went against the nature of things. Not surprisingly, charges of unreason and violence have survived to the modern period. Today, radically anti-Islamic and Islamophobic voices cite similar arguments to depict Islam and Muslims as irrational and violent.

History, though, has its own acts of balancing. Some medieval critics of Christianity such as Peter Bayle and Henry Stubbe defended Islam as a faith closer to reason than the Catholic Church. They praised the simplicity of Islamic faith against the complexities of Christian theology and rituals and admired the advanced state of Islamic civilization. While people like Roger Bacon claimed that the Muslim philosophers al-Farabi and

¹ Cf. Milton K. Munitz, *The Question of Reality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 124.

Avicenna had produced their philosophical edifice despite Islam, not because of it, and pretended to be Muslims outwardly to avoid the persecution of an intolerant religion, the anti-Catholic thinkers of the Middle Ages believed that Islam tolerated rational thinking and scientific inquiry more than others.²

The secular critics consider Islam as essentially incompatible with the secular-humanist ethos of modernity and thus in conflict with the supposedly rational-scientific basis of modern culture. They also point to the discrepancies between traditional religions and the modern concepts of human rights, equality, and freedom. The Enlightenment reason claims autonomy and self-sufficiency and rejects any outside authority such as history, tradition, or religion. It does not reject religion *in toto* but subjects it to the scrutiny of the individual human reason. It draws boundaries for religious belief and denies any role or authority to religion outside them.

Like the medieval critics, the secular critics of Islam link unreason and violence and allege that “Islamic terrorism” is a result of the irrational nature of the Islamic faith. The radical Orientalists add other things to the list: the oppression of women, violation of minority rights, freedom of press, even poverty, corruption, and so forth are all somehow related to the Islamic tradition which did not allow free thinking and oppressed free inquiry, dissent, and pluralism. Needless to say, this is a caricature of the Islamic tradition and based on political considerations rather than a sound analysis of historical facts. Much of the current debate about Islam, reason, rationality, and science in popular circles in the West is shaped by such simplistic yet powerful views.

The Modern Context: The Enlightenment Reason

Modernity *via* the Enlightenment has claimed superiority over other traditions and non-Western cultures because of its claim to ground things in reason and thus create a primarily, if not purely, rational order. In contrast to the supposedly fideistic claims of Christianity, the Enlightenment *philosophes* sought to justify everything on the basis of what Descartes called “clear and distinct ideas”. The question to which Kant responded with his famous essay in 1784 summed up the relevance of reason and rationality for how we were to live in the post-Medieval world: do we live in an enlightened age? Kant believed his generation lived in an “age of enlightenment” rather than in an “enlightened age”. The subtle difference between the two is not to be taken lightly. An enlightened age is one in which the defining elements of culture, society, and politics follow the principle of reason. This is presumably a mature state of humanism and rationality, a world in which reason has defeated the forces of anti-reason. By contrast, an age of enlightenment is one in which the battle for the soul of humanity continues and the forces of reason fight ignorance and darkness. It refers to a process of gradual maturity and rationality, a goal towards which humanity as a whole moves. Since the reign of reason has begun, the end of history is within our reach—an end that is certain to come when the light of reason dawns upon all humanity including non-Europeans.

Kant defined enlightenment as “man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man’s inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another”. Man’s immaturity has created much of the oppression and ignorance that has shaped human history. Kant characterizes the essence of the Enlightenment as the “courage to

² See my “Roots of Misconception: Euro-American Perceptions of Islam Before and After September 11”, in *Islam, Fundamentalism, and the Betrayal of Tradition*, 2nd ed., ed. Joseph Lumbard (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2009), 149–93.

think” for oneself freely: “*Sapere aude!* Have courage to use your own reason! That’s the motto of enlightenment.”³

From academic circles to populist politics, the debate about the Enlightenment reason has now become a debate about the alleged lack of rationality and humanity in Islam. In his preface to his brilliant history of the Enlightenment, Louis Dupre, “stunned by the attacks on September 11, 2001”, wondered “if there was any purpose in writing about the Enlightenment at a time that so brutally seemed to announce the end of its values and ideals”. Dupre does not mean to declare Islamic culture “unenlightened”. But he notes that “Islam never had to go through a prolonged period of critically examining the validity of its spiritual vision, as the West did during the eighteenth century”.⁴ Dupre does not explain why Islam needs to revisit the “validity of its spiritual vision” but he clearly echoes an increasingly common view about the so-called “Islamic reformation”. There have been other more alarming voices calling for an “Islamic enlightenment” to save Muslims from backwardness and the world from an irrational and dangerous religion.

It is a common mistake to assume that reason has been the exclusive property of the Enlightenment thinking since the eighteenth century. Traditional societies have accorded reason an important place in theology, law, politics, ethics, art, and other areas of human life. The Islamic intellectual tradition, for instance, has produced an immense literature on reason, rationality, logic, thinking, contemplation, scientific inquiry, and so on. From Sunni and Shi’i theology to Peripatetic philosophy and Sufism, the classical works are filled with chapters on the nobility of reason, virtues of knowledge, and the spiritual blessings of using one’s reason properly. The notions of reason and rationality that have developed in this tradition, however, are radically different from their modern counterparts. Traditional societies have seen reason as part of a larger reality and placed them within the wider context of existence and meaning. In order to function properly, reason has to accept its place within an order of things that is larger than the knowing subject. As I shall discuss below, the Qur’an considers human reason as part of a larger reality whose meaning cannot be encapsulated and disclosed by logical analysis, conceptual abstraction, or rational discourse alone. The timeless wisdom is that reality is always more than our epistemic constructions of it.

As a mark of modernity, reason has been constructed as a self-regulating principle and the arbiter of truth from the mathematical and physical sciences to social and political orders. One modern tribute to it reads as follows: “The virtue of *Rationality* means the recognition and acceptance of reason as one’s only source of knowledge, one’s only judge of values and one’s only guide to action.”⁵ But in reality, this rarefied view of reason, so passionately defended by academic philosophers, positivists, and the self-proclaimed Enlightenment rationalists, has never worked as expected. Nor has it delivered what it promised, namely, free individuals, rational society, universal equality, scientific culture, reason-bound politics, or economic justice. This in itself calls for a deep reflection about the reasonableness of the Enlightenment project of pure reason. At any rate, elements of “anti-reason” seem to have crept into the new world order promised by the Enlightenment, and the modern capitalist society with its evasive impersonalism, crude individualism, and structural violence is a far cry from a rational social order.

³ Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?”, in *Kant on History*, ed. Lewis White Beck (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1963), 3.

⁴ Louis Dupre, *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), ix.

⁵ Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: New American Library, 1964), 25.

Ever since the triumph of scientism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, reason as logic and rational inquiry has been hailed as a trait of modernity not because we want to grasp the reality of things in the Greek sense of the term but because a purely rational order is believed to enable us to have full control over the world. The instrumental rationality that defines our value schemes, educational systems, political orders, and daily lives provides handy justification for control, predictability, and dominion and gives a largely false sense of security, satisfaction, and fulfillment.⁶ It asserts that things are important because they have a use-value for us. The “rational” is the “useful”. Things no longer have intrinsic intelligibility or “rationality”; they have only use-value, which we are free to use in any way we want.

Reason in the modern period has oscillated between the two extremes of logical positivism and radical historicism. The former view, represented by the Vienna Circle and its followers, has construed reason as an absolute and timeless principle unaffected by history, custom, or such human frailties as emotion and desire. Rationality simply means proving that our concepts correspond to facts. It means drawing conclusions that fit the facts at hand. In this sense, rationality is essentially “logical consistency” and finds its purest expression in formal logic and scientific method.⁷ No other criteria count as a basis for rationality, and the value of everything from religion to art and education must be judged according to the logical and scientific dictates of this a-historic reason. Thus the values by which we are to live must be derived from the facts of nature that we must investigate through rational inquiry and logical analysis. All else is to be rejected as metaphysical nonsense. Reduced to a function of reasoning as formal logic, existence, too, is reduced to a logical term with no meaning and force outside logical-linguistic constructions.⁸

The second view, represented by the waves of postmodernism and constructivism since the 1960s, deconstructed reason to the point of turning it into a by-product of social-historical processes. Like all other human traits and enterprises, reason is a historically constructed notion whose meaning and function varies from one social setting to another. Rationality means applying the human capacity for thinking to different problem-solving situations. It has meaning only in the context of specific issues, problems, or research questions. Depending on the different types of human needs, rationality takes on new meanings and new functions. The defenders of this bounded view of reason insist that this is not to belittle the significance of reason or propose an irrational way of doing things. Rather, it is to admit the limitations of human reason. In this sense, rationality does not necessarily mean drawing conclusions that fit the facts. There are cases where the “anything goes” principle is more useful and functional than some abstract and mathematical notion of reason.⁹

The concept of reason has had a different trajectory in the Islamic tradition and avoided the extremes of positivist absolutism and radical relativism. The reason that emerged within the Islamic *Weltanschauung* proposed a different mode of thinking about existence,

⁶ For a view of modernity as control and predictability, see Albert Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁷ Cf. Charles Taylor, “Rationality”, in his *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 134.

⁸ Martin Heidegger rejects this impoverished meaning of Logos as “discourse” or “analysis” without an ontological ground. Instead, he tries to recover the original Greek acceptance as “gathering” and “togetherness”. See his *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, tr. R. Manheim (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1959), 120–35.

⁹ Paul Feyerabend, who in his *Against the Method* (1975) took upon himself to debunk the absolutist claims of positivist science, is probably the most famous proponent of the second view. Richard Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) provides another constructivist critique of the Enlightenment project of pure reason. Rorty’s alternative is a sort of reason dissolved into human drama. For a discussion of the trails of modern reason in Western philosophy in the twentieth century, see Stephen Toulmin, *Return to Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

the universe, the human state, and God. It was seen as part of a larger reality rather than a self-regulating principle and self-standing tool. As I shall discuss below, it is this integrated and wholesale view of reality that underlies the Qur’anic mode of thinking about reason and rationality.

Ratio and Intellectus

Before moving further, a word of clarification is in order for the reason-intellect bifurcation that has come about as a result of a major philosophical transformation in the history of Western metaphysics. I shall not venture into this history as it requires a detailed treatment. It should be briefly pointed out, however, that *ratio* and *intellectus* came to designate two separate ways of looking at reality in the late Middle Ages and ever since then the two terms have taken different paths. *Ratio* has been used for logical analysis, abstraction, deduction, drawing conclusions, and other logical functions of reason. In this broad sense, *ratio* primarily constituted the basis of scientific knowledge and claimed precision and certainty. By contrast, *intellectus* came to designate intuitive and sapiential knowledge, which was now fully decoupled from rational investigation and logical analysis. By implication, it was seen as lacking a solid foundation like *ratio* because it spoke of such subjective terms as intuition, imagination, illumination but not proofs, evidence, and demonstration.

Had it not been for the later fallout between rationalist naturalism and mystical thought in the Western tradition, this may have been nothing more than a heuristic distinction. As a matter of fact, the Thomistic tradition maintained a relationship of complementarity between *ratio* and *intellectus* and held that they were not opposed to one another but addressed to different aspects of the same reality.¹⁰ But as later history shows, the two terms were employed to represent two substantially different ways of understanding the world and making moral judgments. *Ratio* became the main instrument of natural sciences, which by now had divested nature of all its intrinsic intelligibility and symbolic significance, and developed a separate *modus operandi*. The further estrangement of *ratio* from *intellectus* meant that “rational analysis” was no longer to unveil the built-in intelligibility of things, their symbolic significance, or their spiritual value. Rationality created a new domain of truth for itself and bade farewell to our holistic experience of reality. Rationalism, coupled with naturalism and positivism, sought to reduce reality to the analytical competencies of the human mind and identified quantitative–calculative thinking as the only reliable way of knowing the reality of things. Even though contemporary Christian theologians have insisted that both *ratio* and *intellectus* together make up a proper process of knowing, the bifurcation of discursive and intuitive modes of thinking has played a key role in the secularization of the modern world picture and the profanization of nature.

Such a distinction has never occurred in the Islamic tradition. The word *‘aql* means both reason and intellect in the two senses discussed above. *‘Aql* is innately capable of performing the two functions of logical analysis and intuitive knowing without a contradiction. Furthermore, it is the same *‘aql* that guides our will in our moral choices. It is true that in the later Islamic intellectual tradition, the philosophers have introduced a general distinction between “rational investigation” (*bahth*) and “taste” (*dhawq*), namely, realized knowledge. The two modes of thinking, however, complement each

¹⁰ See Denys Turner, *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 75–88.

other and help us uncover the multilayered structure of reality, which, after all, demands a multidimensional yet integrated approach. In the words of Mulla Sadra, who epitomizes this tradition, “true demonstration does not contradict witnessing based on unveiling (*al-shuhud al-kashfi*)”.¹¹

When Muslims state, largely under the pressure of modern rationalism and out of an inferiority complex against the West, that “Islam is the religion of reason/intellect”, what they mean is not that the Islamic faith, or any faith for that matter, can be reduced to human reason. Such a claim would turn faith into an empirical statement or logical proposition. Faith, by definition, must have a dimension that goes beyond reason; otherwise there would be no need for divine revelation and the prophets. What is beyond reason, however, does not mean anti-reason; it means supra-rational, that which transcends the cognitive competencies of the human reason. Supra-rational is not irrational because reason can admit what lies beyond its capacities. Such an admission is not illogical because it states not ignorance, agnosticism, or blind faith but a self-reflective acknowledgment of limits. Reason cannot think without certain rules and principles. Freedom is not the abolishment of all limits and rules but the exercise of reason in conjunction with virtue.¹²

What is unique and even astounding about human reason is that it can set its own limits to what it can and cannot know. The self-delimitation of reason is a rational act and points to the larger context of existence and intelligibility within which it functions. This is what al-Ghazali attempted with his critique of Peripatetic philosophy whereby he critically tried to draw the limits of speculative reason in the field of pure metaphysics, which he believed belonged to the “invisible world” (*‘alam al-ghayb*). Committing himself to a similar task but working with different premises, Kant, too, sought to lay out the limits of reason in his *Critique of Pure Reason*: “Human reason has this peculiar fate that in one species of its knowledge it is burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it is not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, it is not able to answer.”¹³

The Ontological Ground of Qur’anic Rationality

Long before the Greek philosophical texts were translated into Arabic, Muslims had an encounter with the concept of reason/intellect as outlined in the Qur’an and Sunna. In sharp contrast to the period of *Jahiliyya* or ignorance, Islam represented the era of faith, knowledge, reason, justice, and freedom all at once. Entering Islam meant leaving the mental and social habits of the age of ignorance, polytheism, injustice, and immorality. It meant establishing a new socio-political order based on reason, justice, equality, and virtue. It also

¹¹ Mulla Sadra, *al-Hikma al-muta’aliyya fi al-asfar al-‘aqliyyat al-arba’a* (Beirut: Dar Ihya’ al-Turath al-‘Arabi, 1981), 1(2): 315. In his commentary on Surat al-Waq’ia, Sadra goes on to say: “The difference between the sciences based on theory and the sciences based on vision is like the difference between someone who knows the definition of sweetness and someone who has actually tasted sweetness; and someone who understands the definition of health and power and someone who is actually healthy and powerful.” Mulla Sadra, *Tafsir al-Qur’an al-Karim* (Tehran: Sadra Islamic Philosophy Institute, 2011), 7:10. For more on this, see my *Knowledge in Later Islamic Philosophy: Mulla Sadra On Existence, Intellect and Intuition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 217–21.

¹² What Kant has to say about this is worth quoting in full: “If reason will not subject itself to the law it gives itself, it will have to bow under the yoke of the law which others impose on it, for without any law whatsoever nothing, not even the greatest nonsense, can play its hand for very long. Thus the inevitable consequence of declared lawlessness in thinking (an emancipation from restrictions of reason) is that freedom to think is finally lost.” Kant, “What is Orientation in Thinking?”, in *Kant’s Critique of Practical Reason and Other Writings on Moral Philosophy*, trans. and ed. L. W. Beck (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), 304.

¹³ Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, 2nd ed., trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd, 1933), viii.

required a new ontology of reason to overcome polytheistic logic and moral cynicism. And this was possible only by introducing a new *Weltanschauung* and a new mode of thinking.

In order to understand the place of reason and rationality in the Qur'an and the later Islamic intellectual tradition, we thus need to explore the new ontological ground of reason and the mode of thinking which the Qur'an introduced and did so through stories, implorations, deductions, syllogisms, commands, warnings, praises, and promises of reward and punishment. The rich repertoire of logical deductions and moral exhortations which we find in the Qur'an and Sunna purport to awaken our conscience so that we can begin to use our sensate and rational faculties in a manner that befits our state of existence. The Qur'an says: "*And indeed We have put forth for men in this Qur'an every kind of similitude in order that they may remember*" (39:27). The *mathal*, translated here as *similitude*, refers to metaphors and parables by which a fundamental message is conveyed—a message which may otherwise remain inaccessible to the human mind. But since no parable is devoid of cognitive content, this is an appeal both to reason and imagination so that we may "remember" what is essential.

The path of thinking which we find in the Qur'an is not comprised of assembling of facts; nor is it a pietistic enumeration of commands and prohibitions. Rather, it is a wholesome undertaking that requires setting upon an intellectual, moral, and spiritual journey. It encompasses all of our being and overcomes such dualities as the sensate versus the rational, the material versus the spiritual, the individual versus the universe, nature versus culture, and so on. The integrated mode of thinking which the Qur'an embodies in its unique style reflects the nature of reality, which is interdependent and multilayered. It urges us to see the interconnectedness of things and how one thing leads to the other in the great chain of being.

The Qur'anic mode of thinking is then primarily not descriptive but prescriptive. The Qur'an does not simply describe things as facts or information; its suggestive stories, striking metaphors, and vivid descriptions of God's creation and interventions in history are meant to change the way we see things and our place in the world. It seeks to transform the human conscience so that we can live a life based on justified faith and virtue.¹⁴ Once this conscience is awoken and brought up to reckon with the reality of things, everything falls in place: our reason, thinking, sense organs, seeing, hearing, perceiving, and moral judgments begin to come together. Reason and rationality arise within this larger context of integrated thinking and moral discernment. Far from being a principle and ground of truth by itself, reason functions within the larger context of our being in the world and the human responses we give to reality.

Owing its existence to something larger than what is purely human, reason cannot know God in the sense of "encapsulating" Him because as a finite being, it cannot encircle that which is infinite. God cannot be known empirically because empirical knowledge entails limit, position, relation, relativity, and so on, none of which applies to God. God can be known through reason/intelligence to the extent to which the Absolute and the Infinite can be intuited, grasped, and represented through formal propositions, concepts, and metaphors. To expect reason to do more than that would be to transgress its own limits. If reason, like other components of reality, is part of the order of existence and not the whole of it, then it can never fully encapsulate the whole of reality. But this in no way diminishes or undermines its significance. By contrast, God is the absolute reality that encapsulates everything. He is the One Who Encompasses Everything (*al-Muhit*). Thus the Qur'an says that "*Vision perceives Him not, but He perceives [all] vision; and He is the Subtle, the Acquainted*" (6:103).

¹⁴ Cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1994), 22.

Like love, charity, wisdom, spirituality, and art, rationality is a fundamental human response to the call of reality. It enables us to disclose the intelligible structure of the order of existence. It invites us to overcome our corporeal existence and connect with the world of nature in primarily rational and moral terms. It urges us to establish a socio-political order based on virtue, justice, and freedom. The Qur'an presents a view of the human person according to which our humanity is formed by "rationality" (*'aql, nutq*) and those other traits that are equally central to our task to give a meaningful response to reality. In an ontological sense, this means recognizing the reality of things as they are and seeing them as a "trust" (*amana*) from God. The human response to the divine call of protecting His trust is to become His "vicegerent" (*khalifa*) on earth and thus submit to God, which is the literal meaning of Islam. In the formal religious language, this submission is called *ibada* or worship, the supreme human act that transcends the limitations of human existence and binds us to the Absolute and the Infinite.

In this regard, the Qur'anic mode of thinking is not empirical or rationalist, historical or systematic, apodictic or pedagogical, analytical or descriptive. It is none of them and yet all of them at once. It combines conceptual analysis with moral judgment, empirical observation with spiritual guidance, historical narrative with eschatological expectation, and abstraction with imperative command. The Qur'an is primarily a "guidance" (*hidaya*) for mankind (2:2) and seeks to lead us from ignorance to knowledge, from darkness to light, from injustice and oppression to freedom. The Qur'anic rationality thus extends from the empirical and conceptual to the moral and the spiritual. Being rational means rejecting oppression and injustice and embracing the divine call for justice. The Prophet of Islam has defined the "intelligent person" (*al-kayyis*) as one who "controls his ego and prepares for the afterlife".¹⁵ In Islamic law and theology, a person must be "sane" or "intelligent" (*'aql*) in order to be responsible for his or her actions because there is no religious responsibility (*taklif*) without having sanity or reason (*'aql*).

In the Islamic tradition, this forms the basis of the moral ontology of reason and rationality and establishes a strong connection between intelligence, rationality, faith, and virtue. According to Harith al-Muhasibi (d. 243/857), reason is "a disposition that is known through its deeds".¹⁶ It acts as a principle of moral action and seeks to bring us closer to the Divine. If a person is really intelligent, reasons al-Muhasibi, he will seek to secure his salvation in this world and in the hereafter, for which he must use his reason properly. By basing his analysis on the "nobility of reason", which is the title of his work, al-Muhasibi wants to show the unique character of human reason for establishing a justified faith and a virtuous life. A proper use of reason, illuminated by faith, leads to rational thinking and moral behavior. By the same token, faith articulated and corroborated by reason has depth and certainty. The fourteenth-century philosopher Haydar Amuli sees perfect harmony between faith and reason and compares religion (*al-shar'*) and reason to the body and the spirit. Just as the spirit cannot function without the body, the body cannot find meaning, life, and wholeness without the spirit. Thus "neither religion dispenses with reason nor reason with religion". Raghīb al-Isfahani, quoted by Amuli, states in strikingly unambiguous terms that "reason can never find the right path without religion and religion can never have clarity without reason".¹⁷ Logic and transcendence thus work together to reveal the nature of things

¹⁵ Abu 'Isa al-Tirmidhi, *al-Jami' al-kabir*, ed. Shu'ayb Arna'ut and Haytham 'Abd al-Ghafur (Beirut: Dar al-Risala al-'Alamiyya, 1428/2007), 4:450.2627.

¹⁶ Harith al-Muhasibi, *Sharaf al-'aql wa mahiyyatuh*, ed. M. A. 'Ata (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1402/1982), 19.

¹⁷ Haydar Amuli, *Jami' al-asrar wa manba' al-anwar*, ed. Henry Corbin and Osman Yahia (Tehran: Département d'iranologie de l'Institut franco-iranien de recherche, 1387/1968), 372-3.

and realize our humanity. But this can happen only when we see human reason working in a larger context of thinking and contemplation.

Reason and Thinking in Context

The verb *‘a-q-l*, to have intelligence or to use one’s reason, literally means to hold, to protect, and to guard. Reason is that by which we protect ourselves from falsehood, error, and evildoing. Thus *ma‘qal* means “fortress”. This is the same meaning conveyed in the English phrase “intelligent person”. This basic meaning of reason is not to be taken lightly, for it underlies the essential component of thinking and contemplation as the proper human response to the call of reality. In contrast to attempts to reduce reason and rationality to logical competency and procedural ratiocination, reason as a principle of truth and as an instrument of knowledge represents an encounter with the reality of things. Thinking is not simply to enumerate the physical properties of things or the logical relations of concepts. It is more than a mere mental representation of things because, as Muslim philosophers insist, mental abstraction gives us only a picture of reality. Like all mental abstractions, this picture is frozen and can never fully measure up to the reality itself.

Abstract concepts are essential for rational thinking and the formation of ideas. Thinking, however, requires more than abstraction and use of concepts. It takes place in a context of encounter with reality and puts us in a relationship with something larger than us. It means seeing, observing, listening, hearing, reflecting, contemplating, and drawing the appropriate practical and moral conclusions. It means responding to what we encounter. It involves rational analysis but also moral commitment. In its deepest sense, thinking prevents us from seeing things as a means to an end. It challenges instrumental rationality on both ontological and spiritual grounds. As I shall discuss shortly, if the world has been created by God, then it cannot be reduced to utility. It has a substantive meaning and value independent of us.

In principle, there is nothing essentially wrong with the idea that we attain a degree of rationality by following rules and procedures. Following a rule can certainly count as rational act and comes handy in our daily lives, scientific explorations, economic decisions, political lives, and so forth. But while it has its uses, instrumental rationality moves at the surface of human subjectivity and does not necessarily relate us to reality. Following a rule is no guarantee for a rational outcome. We may follow a procedure and arrive at certain conclusions. The outcome, though, can be the most irrational thing and even a catastrophe. Like many autocracies, the Nazis, for instance, had a rule-bound, procedurally “rational” governance of Germany. But their instrumentalist approach to religion, history, science, and politics destroyed the very meaning of being human. The content and substance of what we do must also have a rational basis.

The Qur’an subscribes to a substantive view of rationality by asserting that not only our instruments and procedures but also our fundamental notions and concepts should be properly rational and conform to the reality of things. The substantive view of rationality follows from the intrinsic intelligibility of existence as God’s creation. Every rational act on our part is an act of conforming to the principle of reason built into the nature of things. Whatever violates this principle lands us in the realm of the irrational.

Substantive rationality is also supported by the anthropology of reason itself. Most Muslim thinkers hold that reason responds to empirical data and abstract notions through its own innate qualities. Far from being a hypothetical *tabula rasa*, reason reflects the

fundamental traits of existence of which it is a part. Raghīb al-Isfahānī divides reason into two: *‘aql matbu’* (innate reason) and *‘aql masmu’* (acquired reason). *Masmu’* literally means that which is heard, referring to things learnt by hearing from others. It roughly corresponds to experience and refers to the context of human relations. Innate reason refers to our inborn ability to grasp the intelligible order and truth of things. It is through innate reason that we inhabit an intelligible world. Acquired reason is what we learn by “hearing” from others and refers to the context of social relations and linguistic forms with which we name things.

The two are intertwined but “innate reason” takes precedence over “acquired reason”. Al-Isfahānī, who attributes this division to Imam ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭalīb, says that “just as the light of the sun has no use when the eye is blinded, acquired reason can do no good when innate reason is corrupted”.¹⁸ Reason then works two ways: in its innate form, it works from inside and out. It encounters and witnesses the visible world through its inborn qualities. This is part of *fitra*, the fundamental human nature, which is our window to the world of existence and thus must be protected in order to “see” right.¹⁹ In its acquired form, reason moves from outside to inside and takes in bits and pieces of empirical data and impressions from the outside world. It is the combination of the two, the inner and the outer, that gives us a fuller picture of the function of reason vis-à-vis reality. This fundamental function of reason, however, always takes place within a larger context of ontological significance and epistemic competency.²⁰

The most fundamental function of reason/intellect is to act as a mirror to reflect the intrinsic meaning and order of things. In performing this task, the intellect has a special relationship with the Divine because it emanates from the Divine Nature. What the intellect discovers as order, necessity, and intelligibility in the universe is a reflection of God’s own nature and will. Mullā Ṣadrā provides a vivid description of this aspect of the intellect:

The intellect, since there is no veil between it and the First Truth [God], can witness by itself the essence of the Truth [God] . . . there is no veiling between the two . . . [God] can certainly manifest itself to the intellect and the manifestation here takes place through the lucid [unveiling of God’s] essence. There is no aspect or quality added to the Divine and another being added to [the intellect]. The essence of the intellect is like a polished mirror on which the form of the Truth shines. On the mirror itself, there is no existential entity except the reflected form, and the reflected form is nothing but the form related to the Truth. Therefore in the essence of the intellect there is nothing other than the form of the Truth and its theophany. There are no two things here: the existence of the intellect and the manifestation of the Truth upon it because one being

¹⁸ Raghīb al-Isfahānī, *al-Mufradāt fī ghārib al-Qurʾān* (Istanbul: Kahraman Yayınları, 1406/1986), 511. Both Harīth al-Muhasibī and al-Ghazālī refer to this two-fold definition of reason; see al-Muhasibī, *Sharaf al-‘aql*, 20.

¹⁹ Al-Farabī identifies this as one of the six meanings of *‘aql*; see Abū Naṣr al-Farabī, *Risāla fī al-‘aql*, ed. Maurice Bouygués (Beirut: Dar al-Mashriq, 1403/1983), 8–9.

²⁰ The later philosophical tradition has developed an elaborate epistemology and anthropology of reason which includes *‘aql hayulānī* or *‘aql bi al-quwwa* (the material or potential intellect), *‘aql bi al-fiʿl* (the actualized intellect), *‘aql mustafad* (the acquired intellect), and finally *‘aql faʿāl* (the active intellect). Since I cannot discuss these later interpretations here, I will only refer to the foundational texts by the philosophers. For Abū Yūsuf al-Kindī’s discussion and classification of *‘aql*, which is the first among the philosophers, see his “*Risāla fī al-‘aql*” [On the intellect], in *L’Intellect selon Kindī*, ed. Jean Jolivet (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971). Al-Farabī fully develops al-Kindī’s initial exploration in his various works; see especially *Risāla fī al-‘aql*. Avicenna discusses *‘aql* and its types and functions in his various works including the *Shifā’* and *Najāt* but also *al-Mabda’ wa al-ma’ād*. For an extensive survey of their views against the Greek background, see Herbert A. Davidson, *Alfarabī, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect: Their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect, and Theories of Human Intellect* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

cannot have two existences. By the same token, two [distinct] forms cannot emanate from God in one single manner. Because of this, the sages (*urafa'*) have said that God does not manifest [Himself] twice in the same form. Thus it is known that the existence of the intellect is nothing but a manifestation of God the Exalted through His Form on the intellect; and the form of God's essence is itself His own Essence, not something added to Him.²¹

The Vocabulary of Thinking in the Qur'an

The Qur'an uses a number of terms that are closely related to reason/intellect and thinking. *Tafakkur*, "thinking", *qalb*, "heart", *fu'ad*, "inner heart", and *lubb*, literally "seed" meaning "essential heart", are among these terms and each corresponds to a different aspect of the act of perceiving, thinking, and reflecting. There are also other terms which fall within the same semantic field of *aql*: *ilm*, "knowledge"; *fahm*, "understanding"; *fiqh*, "perceiving/understanding"; *idrak*, "grasping"; *shu'ur*, "consciousness"; *burhan*, "demonstration"; *hujja*, "evidence"; *bayyina*, "clear evidence"; *sultan*, "overwhelming evidence"; *furqan*, "discernment"; *tadabbur*, "contemplation"; *nutq*, "talking/thinking"; *hukm*, "judgment"; *hikma*, "wisdom"; and *dhikr*, "remembrance/invocation". The Qur'anic usage of these terms, whose full exposition requires a separate study, establishes a context of integrated thinking in which our encounter with reality unveils different aspects of the all-inclusive reality of existence. More importantly, it leads to a mode of thinking that combines empirical observation, rational analysis, moral judgment, and spiritual refinement.

This rich vocabulary points to the wholeness of perceiving and thinking. In contrast to categorical distinctions between sensate perception and conceptual analysis, our natural or "first-order" encounter with things takes place as a unitary experience. In perceiving things, our sense organs and reason work together. The sharp distinctions between sensate qualities, which correspond to the physical-material world, and intellectual notions, which correspond to the world of the mind, are reflections of the Cartesian bifurcation between *res extensa* and *res cogitans* and hardly give us an accurate description of the actual act of perceiving and understanding. These categories belong to the "second-order" reflection upon reality whereby we make distinctions between subject and object, the knower and the known, the perceiver and the perceived, mental and material, and so forth. Our first-order encounter with the world takes place in a different context.

The wholeness of our epistemic experience of things stems from the wholeness of existence. Knowing as encounter means that we stand before our object of knowledge. This puts us in a special relationship with the reality of things in that we respond to it through our epistemic faculties rather than create its meaning in a self-referential way. This meaning of knowing through reason is reflected in one of the root meanings of the word *aql*, which is to tie, to link, to relate. Reason ties us to the truth and thus opens up a new horizon beyond the ordinary chain of causes. In a horizontal way, the human reason moves between and across facts and concepts and links them to one another. In a vertical way, it links what is below to what is higher. The Qur'an insists on the convergence of the two axes of causality: horizontal, which regulates the world of physical causes, and vertical, which introduces the "divine command" (*amr*) into the natural realm. There is no

²¹ Mulla Sadra, *Risalat al-hashr*, trans. and ed. M. Khwajawi (Tehran: Intisharat-i Mawlawi, 1418/1998), 85–6.

contradiction between the two but they follow different rules. The day and night follow each other as part of the natural order in which we live and there is no breaking of this rule. But also “when God wants something to happen, He says to it ‘be’ and it is” (36:82). Each realm of existence requires a different type of thinking.

The elaborate vocabulary of sensing, reasoning, and thinking which the Qur’an employs is necessitated by the nature of reality itself. A multilayered and multidimensional reality cannot be perceived by a single cognitive method. It requires a larger toolset of conceptual abilities. At this point, the Qur’an speaks of *‘alam al-ghayb*, “the world of the invisible”, and *‘alam al-shahada*, “the world of the visible”. The invisible world refers to that realm of existence known to God alone. God has given intimations of this world but no comprehensive knowledge of it has been made available. While not accessible to the human experience, the invisible world guides our encounter with the world of visible existence and thus functions as a signpost for our conceptual analyses and moral judgments. In a metaphysical and moral sense, it regulates the affairs of the visible world in which we live. What is striking about the Qur’anic notion of the “visible world” is that a proper perception of it is based on an experience of “witnessing” (*mushahada*), which is different from looking and seeing. Witnessing means standing before that which presents itself. It entails looking and seeing but also attending to. It is more like the experience of looking at a landscape and having a *gestalt* perception of it. In contemplating a landscape, we move between parts and whole and each time discover a new relationship.

In this sense, our encounter with the reality of things is a rational and conceptual process but takes place within a larger context of intelligibility and significance that goes beyond purely logical and discursive thinking. Concepts, which are not created in vacuum, correspond to different aspects of reality and emerge in our encounter with reality, which the Qur’an describes as “bearing witness to the truth”. Thus we “see” the light, “touch” the wood, “smell” the rose, “taste” the cherry, “perceive” the dimension, “think of” the infinitude, “have consciousness of” the nearness of the water, “discern” between a thing and its shadow, “understand” a command, “respond” to a call, “submit” to truth, “accept” the evidence, “contemplate” the meaning of life, and so on. Each of these epistemic acts says something about our mental and conceptual abilities with which we understand the world. But more importantly, they correspond to something outside us and expand the horizon of our subjectivity.

Reason, Heart, and the Human Conscience

This is comparable to the unitary experience of reality like a moving landscape rather than a particular frame taken out of it for dissection. The Qur’an identifies the heart (*al-qalb*) as the proper locus of the unitary experience of reality. This is where perceptual experience, conceptual thinking, and moral judgment blend together. Given the sentimentalization of the “heart” since the Cartesian turn in Western philosophy, it should be noted that the Qur’an assigns a clearly epistemic and intellectual function to the heart. The verses that mention the heart refer to our deep conscience by which we see reality as a whole. It combines rational thinking and moral judgment. The heart, when clean and properly guided, presides over other epistemic faculties and enlightens them about the truth. Heart and reason function as a conduit for gaining insight into the reality of things and how we should relate ourselves to it. It is in this context that the Arabic linguists have identified *‘aql* and

qalb as being synonymous.²² The goal of thinking through *‘aql* and *qalb* is to disclose and inhabit the intelligible order from which particular beings in the universe derive their meaning. Muslim thinkers see no contradiction between reason and heart, rational thinking and contemplation, logic and transcendence. One of the major figures of the kalam tradition, Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, begins his famous work *al-Muqabasat* with a prayer to God to grant him “through His grace and generosity the spirit of the heart through the light of the intellect (*ruh al-qalb bi nur al-‘aql*)”.²³

This is not surprising if we understand how our empirical and conceptual engagement with things works. Possessing sense organs is no guarantee for perceiving things properly because the senses are subsumed under a higher epistemic principle. After all, it is our reason that makes sense of what our sense organs perceive as a raw experience. We may have an eye with which to see but may see things in a distorted manner because of, say, a nervous breakdown.²⁴ We may have two ears but may fail to hear because we may deliberately choose not to hear certain things. We may have a sharp mind but may not arrive at the right conclusion in, say, a legal dispute because our desire to win the case may take over our judgment. Our sensate faculties thus function within a larger context of conceptual, emotional, and moral conditions. The process of arriving at the truth of something entails a unitary experience and involves sensate, cognitive, psychological, and moral principles and considerations. Al-Ghazali, following the tradition before him and basing his analysis on the Sunna, describes sense organs as “the soldiers of the heart” and says that “the heart is like the king and the soldiers are like its servants and aids”.²⁵ Even the physically sound functioning of the sense organs depends on the soundness and cleanliness of the heart.

The human person is endowed with reason and thus can have access to the reality of things. But his reason and judgment can be clouded by his ego and carnal desires. He may thus lose his ability for discernment and can delude himself into thinking that he knows, and forgets the stubborn and commanding nature of the ego. Against this, the Qur’an warns:

Have you seen the one who takes as his god his own desire? Then would you be a guardian over him? Or do you think that most of them hear or reason? They are only like cattle; nay, they are even farther astray from the Path. (25:43–4)

Animals serve the purpose for which they have been created. But those who have been created to worship God take their own ego as their master and worship themselves even though they have been given clear signs. This is where their “hearing” and “reasoning” comes to no avail.²⁶ The Qur’an goes further and challenges those who claim to see and hear when in fact their conscience has been blinded:

And among them are those who listen to you. But can you cause the deaf to hear, although they will not use reason? And among them are those who look at you. But

²² Ibn al-Manzur, *Lisan al-‘Arab* (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1374–5/1955–6), 1:687; 11: 458–9. Entries on *‘aql* and *qalb*, respectively.

²³ Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, *al-Muqabasat*, ed. H. Sandubo (Tunisia: Dar al-Ma‘arif, 1411/1991), 7.

²⁴ Compare this with what Zarathustra tells the people who show no interest in what he has to say: “Must one first shatter their ears to teach them to hear with their eyes?” F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, tr. R. J. Hollingdale (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1961), 45.

²⁵ Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, “Rawdat al-talibin wa ‘umdat al-salikin”, in *Majmu‘a rasa’il al-Imam al-Ghazali* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1414/1994), 32.

²⁶ Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur’an al-‘Azim* (Beirut: Dar al-Ma‘rifa, 1426/2006), 1141.

can you guide the blind although they will not [attempt to] see? Indeed, God does not wrong the people at all, but it is the people who are wronging themselves. (10:42–4)

And We have certainly created for hell many of the jinn and mankind. They have hearts with which they do not understand, they have eyes with which they do not see, and they have ears with which they do not hear. Those are like livestock; rather, they are more astray. It is they who are the heedless. (7:179)

This suggests that having sense organs is no guarantee to perceive the truth. Empirical knowledge by itself cannot reveal the truth of things. The heart and the sense organs, which are the “soldiers of the heart”, must all be sound:

We made for them hearing and vision and hearts. But their hearing and vision and hearts availed them not from anything [of the punishment] when they were [continually] rejecting God’s signs; and they were enveloped by what they used to ridicule. (46:26)

The failure of seeing, hearing, and so forth, does not stem from a biological imperfection but from the closure of the mind and the heart to the truth. According to Ibn Kathir, this is a result of the fact that one does not “benefit from these organs which God has created as a cause for guidance”.²⁷ In some respects, this is comparable to the vain effort to explain colors to the blind. The ontological disconnect that separates the visually blind from the experience of colors makes the discourse about colors impossible. But a greater illness is the illusion that we think we see things because we have eyes when in fact we do not see.²⁸ The Qur’an insists that “seeing” as witnessing the truth requires a higher principle of intelligibility than bodily hearing and seeing:

Indeed, you will not make the dead hear, nor will you make the deaf hear the call when they have turned their backs retreating.

Nor can you lead the blind out of their error, you can only make to hear those who believe in Our proofs/signs, and those who have submitted [themselves to God]. (27:80–1)

Having sound sensate organs is then not enough; they need to be guided by intelligence and wisdom. As Plato says in *Phaedrus* 250, “sight is the most piercing of our bodily senses; though not by that is wisdom seen”. The heart must be uncorrupted and untainted in order to function properly. Quoting the Qur’an and the Prophet of Islam, al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi (d. 297/910) concludes, in an important work on the heart attributed to him, that the “soundness of sensate organs is possible through the soundness of heart; their corruption comes with the corruption of the heart”.²⁹ Thus *al-sadr*, “the chest”, *al-qalb*, “the heart”, *al-fu’ad*, “the inner heart”, and *al-lubb*, “the innermost intellect”, which al-Tirmidhi analyzes with great perspicacity, do not function as separate organs but rather provide a cognitive and spiritual context for our experience of the truth. A famous saying

²⁷ Ibid., 659.

²⁸ Cf. Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, tr. J. G. Gray (New York: Harper Books, 1968), 165.

²⁹ Abu ‘Abdullah al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi, *Bayan al-farq bayna al-sadr wa al-qalb wa al-fu’ad wa al-lubb* (Amman: al-Markaz al-Maliki li al-Buhuth wa al-Dirasat al-Islamiyya, 1430/2009), 15. For the English translation of his work see al-Tirmidhi, “A Treatise on the Heart”, in *Three Early Sufi Texts*, 2nd ed., trans. Nicholas Heer (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2009).

of the Prophet of Islam sums up this view of the heart and its relation to other faculties and sense organs: “Verily, there is in the body a small piece of flesh; if it is good, the whole body is good and if it is corrupted the whole body is corrupted. Verily, it is the heart.”³⁰ As the proper locus of *tasdiq*, “confirmation” or “corroboration”, the heart gathers together sensate and conceptual knowledge and provides a unitary experience of reality.

The Qur’an thus insists on the total soundness and integrity of our sensate, psychological, and mental faculties in order for us to know, and advises us to “travel on earth”. Travelling or journeying means to look at the entire landscape of existence and history in order to put things in perspective:

So have they not traveled through the earth and have hearts by which to reason and ears by which to hear? For indeed, it is not eyes that are blinded, but blinded are the hearts which are within the breasts. (22:46)

Once the heart is blinded, all else is skewed and darkened. A similar danger is to act on *zann* (subjective opinion or conjecture), without sound evidence and firm foundation. Reason cannot accept conjecture as truth. Whether we conduct a scientific research or investigate the grounds of religious faith, we need more than conjecture on which to build our truth-claims. The same principle applies to human relations and moral attitude (see Qur’an 49:12). Truth, not conjecture, must be the basis of justification for faith:

Say, “Are there of your ‘partners’ any who guides to the truth?” Say, “God guides to the truth. So is He who guides to the truth more worthy to be followed or he who guides not unless he is guided? Then what is [wrong] with you—how do you judge? And most of them follow nothing but conjecture. Certainly, conjecture can be of no avail against the truth. Surely, God is All-Aware of what they do.” (10:35–6; see also 6:116)

As the presiding principle of sensate and cognitive faculties, the heart provides “evidence” (*al-burhan*) and gives “certainty” (*al-yaqin*). But this is contingent upon keeping the heart functioning properly in conjunction with reason and the soul to ensure certainty, integrity, and tranquility “in the kingdom of the corporeal body of the human person” (*mamlakat badan al-insan*).³¹ According to the spiritual anthropology of the Qur’an, one must constantly work on his heart, mind, and conscience, and guard himself against falsehood. When a person persistently mistakes falsehood for truth and bases his judgment on pure conjecture and selfish desires, then he develops a certain habit of mind and loses his ability to distinguish between truth and error. When this happens, which is not rare given the enormous power of desires on reason, his heart becomes “sealed” and he loses his conscience. Thus the phrase “God has sealed their hearts” should be understood not in a fatalistic manner whereby God has already ordained certain people to disbelief. This interpretation would go against the thrust of the Qur’anic message. Rather, when one keeps committing the same intellectual and moral mistake and does not repent, he develops a certain habit of misusing his reason, and God leaves those who deliberately persist on

³⁰ Muhammad ibn Isma‘il al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari* (Beirut: Dar al-Jalil, n.d.), 1:20.52.

³¹ Shah Waliullah al-Dihlawi, *Hujjat Allah al-baligha* (Cairo: Dar al-Turath, n.d.), 2:89. This evocative phrase by Shah Waliullah of Delhi (d. 1176/1762), one of the greatest scholars of the Indian subcontinent, also sums up the integrative approach of classical Muslim thinkers towards the human person.

wrongdoing. A number of verses describe this closure of the heart/mind/conscience as a total loss of direction in both the intellectual and moral senses of the term:

Indeed, those who disbelieve—it is all the same for them whether you warn them or do not warn them—they will not believe. God has set a seal upon their hearts and upon their hearing, and over their vision is a veil. And for them is a great punishment. (2:6–7)

And among them are those who listen to you, but We have placed over their hearts coverings, lest they understand it, and in their ears deafness. And if they should see every sign, they will not believe in it. Even when they come to you arguing with you, those who disbelieve say, “This is not but legends of the former peoples.” (6:25)

The seven heavens and the earth and whatever is in them exalt Him. And there is not a thing except that it exalts [God] by His praise, but you do not understand their [way of] exalting. Indeed, He is ever Forbearing and Forgiving. And when you recite the Qur’an, We put between you and those who believe not in the hereafter an invisible veil. And We have placed over their hearts coverings, lest they understand it, and in their ears deafness. And when you mention your Lord alone in the Qur’an, they turn back in aversion. (7:44–6)

When the hypocrites come to you [O Muhammad], they say, “We testify that you are the Messenger of God.” And God knows that you are His messenger, and God testifies that the hypocrites are liars. They have taken their oaths as a cover, so they averted [people] from the way of God. Indeed, it was evil that they were doing. That is because they believed, and then they disbelieved; so their hearts were sealed over, and they do not understand. (63:1–3)

By contrast, those whose heart and conscience have been illuminated with the light of faith find peace and repose in the remembrance of God. This “finding” is not something sentimental or imaginative; it touches the core of our existence and links us to God on the one hand, and to the reality of things on the other. It guides our thinking and acting in the world and saturates our lives with meaning. Thus the Qur’an says:

Those who believe and whose hearts find repose in the remembrance of God, verily, in the remembrance of God do hearts find rest. (13:28)

It is He who sent down tranquility into the hearts of the believers that they would increase in faith along with their [present] faith. And to God belong the soldiers of the heavens and the earth, and ever is God All-Knowing and Wise. (48:4)

In short, our conscience must be in the right place in order for our reason to function properly.

Reason, Existence, and the Universe

The wholesale encounter with reality is a key component of the Qur’anic vocabulary of thinking and stems from the essential relationship between reason and existence. The word “existence” (*al-wujud*) is not used in the Qur’an. But the conceptual framework within which the world of creation is presented points to an order of existence in which God’s

creative act is disclosed. As the ground of all that exists, existence is a gift of divine creation and derives its sustenance from God. In this sense, existence is the face of the Divine looking to the world of creation (*‘alam al-khalq*). The created order displays various modalities of existence, which discloses and particularizes itself into specific forms. While these forms or “shares of existence” possess different qualities, they are united by the underlying reality of existence. The Qur’anic phrase *kull*, “everything” and “all”, frequently used in the cosmological verses, refers to this aspect of existence: all things are interrelated to one another by virtue of the fact that they are created by the same God who, as we mentioned, is *al-Muhit*, the One Who Encompasses Everything.

It is in this context that reason finds its proper relationship with existence. Existence is intrinsically intelligible because God creates optimally and what He creates has meaning, purpose, and intelligibility built into it.³² The following verse combines the purpose of creation, thinking, and praying:

Do they not contemplate within themselves? God has not created the heavens and the earth and what is between them except in truth and for a specified term. And indeed, many of the people, in [the matter of] the meeting with their Lord, are disbelievers. Have they not traveled through the earth and observed how was the end of those before them? They were greater than them in power, and they plowed the earth and built it up more than they have built it up, and their messengers came to them with clear evidences. And God would not ever have wronged them, but they were wronging themselves. (30:8–9)

God creates with wisdom (*hikma*), purpose (*ghaya*), and providence (*‘inaya*). As the ultimate source of all existence and intelligibility, God bestows these qualities on His creation and saturates the order of creation with meaning and purpose. The celebrated saying that “the first thing God has created is intellect (*al-‘aql*)” should be understood in this context. The “intellect” here refers to the universal principles of truth, order, and intelligibility, which God has built into the nature of things. The intellect is the first thing God has created because God creates things according to a certain order and principle. Thus “the intellect is the closest thing to the Divine”.³³ In contrast to modern subjectivism, meaning is not simply a property of the mind. Just as knowledge cannot be reduced to the internal workings of the mind, as is the case with Descartes, meaning cannot be written off, *a la* Galileo, as a “secondary quality” superimposed by the mind upon things either. Since meaning is not created but articulated and appropriated by the mind, its essence lies outside one’s mental constructions of it.

The moral import of this premise is clear: having a meaning and purpose in a non-subjective manner entails a tremendous sense of responsibility. Admitting that we, like the universe, have been created for a purpose means accepting a moral responsibility beyond ourselves. The Qur’an addresses the human person directly to make this point:

Do you then think that We have created you without a purpose and that you will not be returned to Us? The True Sovereign is too exalted above that. (23:115)

Does man think that he will be left wandering [at his own whim]? (75:36)

³² This premise is also the basis of the argument that this is the best of all possible worlds which God could create. For this version of the “*ahsan al-nizam*” argument, see my “Mulla Sadra on Theodicy and the Best of All Possible Worlds”, *Oxford Journal of Islamic Studies* 18, no. 2 (2007): 183–201.

³³ Muhammad ‘Ali al-Tahanawi, *Kashshaf istilahat al-funun* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1418/1998), 3:307.

As far as the universe is concerned, God creates things and the laws by which they exist. These laws, called *sunnat Allah*, the “wants of God”, sustain the principles of order, harmony, and continuity in the universe. It is the function of the human reason to discover these universal principles and intrinsic qualities. By applying itself to these principles, the intellect participates in the intelligible order of existence. Reason is able to discover these intrinsic modes of intelligibility because they are the intelligible principles built into the nature of reality. We can rationally and scientifically analyze the physical universe because it lends itself to such investigation in the first place. The Qur’an finds no contradiction between studying the universe as a natural phenomenon and seeing it as the supreme miracle of God.

The entire universe is an *aya*, a “sign” for man from God, and points to something beyond itself. The Qur’an uses the same word, *aya*, to refer to its verses as well as “God’s signs” (*ayat Allah*) in the universe, which can be compared to what the Latins have called *vestigia Dei*. The multiple meanings of *aya* confirm the profound connections between God’s verses in the scripture and His signs in the world of creation: both come from God; both are sacred; both are to be treated with utmost care; both require commitment. God’s signs in the two senses are directly related to reason and rationality because they are addressed to the human reason so that man can understand the reality of things (theoretical reason) and pursue virtue and happiness (practical reason). Such a basic and “material” fact as counting years and keeping time is indeed a “sign” for those who ponder over the order and regularity of the universe:

It is He who made the sun a shining light and the moon a light [for you] and determined for it phases—that you may know the number of years and account [of time]. God has not created this except in truth. He details the signs (ayat) for a people who know. Indeed, in the alternation of the night and the day and [in] what God has created in the heavens and the earth are signs for a people who fear God. (10:5–6)

God presents these signs to humans so that they can use their reason and derive the logical conclusion from them, which is to believe in God. Every sign in the Qur’an and the universe invites a response from the side of the human being. As Izutsu points out, humans can read these signs properly and “confirm” (*tasdiq*) their truth. Or, they fail to use their reason, succumb to their desires, and thus “reject” (*takdhib*) their truth. While the first response leads to sincere faith with certainty, the second lands us in disbelief (*kufr*) and denial.³⁴ Misreading God’s “clear signs” disconnects us from the reality, and can imperil salvation: “*And they will say: ‘Had we but listened or used our intelligence, we would not have been among the dwellers of the blazing fire!’*” (67:10). Only those who can really use their reason can understand the true meaning of “signs” and act accordingly: “*We have made clear to you the signs if you shall use your reason*”, the Qur’an says (3:118).

Those who use their reason can begin to decipher the non-linguistic language of the universe and understand how it submits to God. This deeper wisdom helps us see the difference between the one who is blind and the one who sees. The Qur’an is forceful in asserting that denying God and taking partners unto Him goes against the nature of things and violates the principle of reason:

And unto God alone falls in prostration whoever is in the heavens and the earth, willingly or unwillingly, and so do their shadows in the mornings and in the afternoons.

³⁴ Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Qur’an: Semantics of the Qur’anic Weltanschauung* (Tokyo: The Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1964), 136–7.

Say: “Who is the Lord of the heavens and the earth?” Say: “[It is] God.” Say: “Have you then taken [for worship] protectors other than Him, such as have no power either for benefit or for harm to themselves?” Say: “Is the blind equal to the one who sees? Or darkness equal to light? Or do they assign to God partners who created the like of His creation, so that the creation [which they made and His creation] seemed alike to them.” Say: “God is the Creator of all things, He is the One, the Irresistible.” (13:15–16)

Once this is clarified, observation, logical analysis, contemplation, and praying join together:

And to God belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth, and God is over all things competent. Indeed, in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of the night and the day are signs for those of understanding; who remember God while standing or sitting or [lying] on their sides and give thought to the creation of the heavens and the earth, [saying:] “Our Lord, You did not create this in vain; exalted are You [above such a thing]; then protect us from the punishment of the fire. Our Lord, indeed whoever You admit to the fire—You have disgraced him, and for the wrongdoers there are no helpers. Our Lord, indeed we have heard a caller calling to faith, [saying:] ‘Believe in your Lord,’ and we have believed. Our Lord, so forgive us our sins and remove from us our misdeeds and cause us to die with the righteous. Our Lord, and grant us what You promised us through Your messengers and do not disgrace us on the Day of Resurrection. Indeed, You do not fail in [Your] promise”. (3:189–94)

According to the Qur’an, the creation of the universe by God is so reasonable and self-evident that reason, unhindered by irrational causes, immediately recognizes it. This grasping of the truth through intuition (*hads*) underlies much of our empirical and conceptual knowledge. Those who recognize the truth when they see it do in fact use their reason in the most proper way. The Qur’an uses the phrase *ulu al-albab*, “those who have deep understanding of things”, to distinguish them from those who are merely interested in being smart. *Al-bab*, plural of *lubb*, meaning the essence and core of something, refers to a deeper perception of the reality of things which we understand through our reason. According to Ibn Kathir, *ulu al-albab* refers to those “complete and perspicacious intellects which perceive the reality of things in their apparent reality”.³⁵ Qurtubi describes them as those who “use their reason in contemplating proofs”.³⁶ Once reason is put to proper use, it obtains new degrees of understanding, and the categorical distinctions between reasoning, contemplating, and praying evaporate. This is when one begins to obtain certainty (*al-yaqin*), which leaves no doubt about the truth of something standing before us. At this point, the Qur’an puts so much emphasis on the self-evident and clear nature of the truth that it forbids forcing people into converting to Islam. Instead, they should be able to see the truth by themselves:

There is no compulsion in religion. Verily, the Right Path has become distinct from the wrong path. Whoever disbelieves in Taghut and believes in God, then he has grasped the most trustworthy handhold that will never break. And God is the All-Hearer, All-Knower. (2:256)

³⁵ Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir*, 334.

³⁶ Abu ‘Abdullah al-Qurtubi, *al-Jami‘ li ahkam al-Qur’an* (Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm, 1424/2004), 1:780.

The “language of the universe” is revealed to human reason in the form of strict orders, laws, principles, patterns but also powerful symbols, parables, and metaphors. The Qur’an sees no contradiction between strict rules of logic, which come from nothing but God’s own Nature, and the symbolism of creation. The Qur’an invites us to discover the perfect order God has created in the universe. The order and regularity that come with this are a proof for the existence of an intelligent Creator. But we are also expected to grasp the symbolic language of the universe and how it praises God at every moment:

*The seven heavens and the earth and whatever is in them exalt Him. And there is not a thing except that it exalts Him by His praise, but you do not understand (tafqahuna) their [way of] exalting. Indeed, He is ever Forbearing and Forgiving. (17:44)*³⁷

A reductionist and rationalist approach, which dwarfs our cognitive capacities and atrophies our imaginative powers, prevents us from understanding the non-discursive language of the universe. The world of creation has a constant conversation with its Creator because it is a “*muslim*” (Qur’an 3:83), namely, that which *surrenders* to God. Humans share this quality with nature with one fundamental difference: they have free will (*irada*) and must choose faith over disbelief, truth over falsehood, and virtue over vice.³⁸ A person who has perfected his sense of discernment can intuit and grasp the universe praising God. This intuitive and “imaginative” thinking is not outside the ken of reason because reason, as I have been arguing, can accommodate non-formal articulations of the truth and understand the non-discursive insights we gain in our encounter with reality.

Rationality and Morality

The same intuitive thinking is at work in our moral choices. Since moral principles are self-evident in most cases, we know how we need to act in such situations. But is it enough to have a self-evident argument to be able to act virtuously? Given the driving force of human emotions, even the correct use of reason alone cannot be sufficient to always make the right moral choices: we have to combine reason and will, the two distinguishing features of being human, in order to act on what we believe. In contrast to Descartes, who called the human person a “machine who thinks”, we are also beings who will. Here “will” does not simply designate choosing one option or the other. It refers to our ability to make a choice from among available possibilities. But in an axiological sense, it means choosing truth over falsehood and good over evil. Reason and rationality in the broad sense discussed above guide our choices and form the content of our moral behavior. Rationality and morality thus go hand in hand because we are rational animals *and* moral beings at the same time.

³⁷ This and similar verses underlie the commonly held view in the Islamic tradition that the entire universe is alive and that “everything has soul”. See Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir*, 932. Mulla Sadra holds that “all animal, plant, and inanimate natures have knowledge and consciousness by themselves, through the necessities of their essences and their particular effects, on account of their partaking of existence because existence is identical with light and manifestation. Existence is therefore united with the qualities of the perfection of existence in knowledge, power, volition, life, and the like”. Mulla Sadra, “Ajwibat al-masa’il al-kashaniyya”, in *Majmu’-a-yi rasa’il-i falsafi-yi sadr al-muta’allihin*, ed. Hamid Naji Isfahani (Tehran: Intisharat-i Hikmat, 1375/1956), 137. For more on the ontological vitalism of Islamic cosmology, see my *Knowledge in Later Islamic Philosophy*, 229–32.

³⁸ Quoting a popular saying, al-Tahanawi describes it as follows: “God has mounted reason in the angels without carnal desire, put desires in the animals without reason, and in the Children of Adam both of them. Thus whoever has his reason triumph over his carnal desires, he is better than the angels, and whoever has his carnal desires triumph over his reason, he is lower than the animals.” al-Tahanawi, *Kashshaf*, 3:314.

In the Qur'an, this point is registered in the relationship between using reason and having a moral and spiritual awareness of God. The word *taqwa*, usually translated as consciousness and fear of God, literally means to protect and guard oneself against danger. In the tradition, it refers to "protecting the soul from what afflicts it".³⁹ As explained in hadith, *taqwa* means having the majestic presence of God in one's heart by which to protect oneself against everything false, evil, and ugly. In this sense, the conceptual meanings of *'aql* and *taqwa* converge: they both refer to our conscious effort to protect ourselves against the inhuman and immoral consequences of evildoing, injustice, and oppression. Thus "the intelligent person is the one who has consciousness (*taqwa*) of his Lord and who reckons with his soul".⁴⁰

This principle underlies the rational basis of choosing goodness over evil and virtue over vice. Reason has no problem with accepting "consciousness of God" (*taqwa*) as a moral and spiritual principle because it guides our moral choices. It is only by combining intelligibility, meaning, and will that we fulfill our humanity as "rational animals". Moral choices make sense not because simply they are our free choices but because they let us participate in the intelligible order of existence and thus enable us to go beyond ourselves and reach out to a larger reality. According to the Islamic ethical tradition, upholding justice makes sense because justice (*'adl*) means "putting things in their proper place". Likewise, opposing injustice is reasonable because injustice (*zulm*) means "putting things out of their place", namely, destroying the order that gives meaning to things. An act is rational when it conforms to the reality of something and pays due attention to its proper place. It then makes perfect sense to protect oneself against the destructive forces of selfishness and evildoing; acting otherwise contradicts the basis of our humanity. Summing up these points, Ibn Miskawayh says: "Since justice consists in indeed giving to the right person what ought to be given in the right way, it would be inconceivable that men should not owe God, exalted is He, who granted us all these immense goods, an obligation which they should fulfill."⁴¹

We can then conclude that it is rational to be moral. By the same token, immorality is irrational because it goes against our self-interest and violates the order of things, which, in turn, causes us harm. The Qur'anic treatment of moral choices and how they are made within the larger context of existence establishes rationality as a key component of moral behavior. But the reverse is also true: rationality, carried to its full capacity, results in moral behavior and extends to other human beings, the universe, and eventually God. According to the Qur'an, human beings have been granted reason to discern between right and wrong on the one hand, and good and evil on the other. In terms of both true knowledge and moral behavior, we use reason to make the right choices. The famous controversy among Muslim theologians over whether we know things to be true and good because they are intrinsically so or because God has created them in that way is irrelevant here. The key point is that correct thinking and moral behavior complement each other and thus reject any dichotomy between reason, rationality, belief, and morality. Thus Ibn Hazm says that "knowledge has a decisive role in the implementation of virtues . . . knowledge has a share in each and every virtue and ignorance in each and every vice".⁴² In a similar vein, Ibn Miskawayh identifies

³⁹ al-Isfahani, *al-Mufradat*, 833.

⁴⁰ al-Tahanawi, *Kashshaf*, 3:314.

⁴¹ Ibn Miskawayh, *The Refinement of Character*, tr. Constantine K. Zurayk (Beirut: The American University of Beirut, 1968/1387), 106.

⁴² Ibn Hazm, *al-Ahklaq wa al-siyar fi mudawat al-nufus*, ed. Tahir Ahmad Makki (Jeddah: Dar al-Manarah, 1428/2007), 124.

“the intelligent man” as one who seeks “virtue in his rational soul, examines the imperfections of this soul in particular, and strives to remedy them to the extent of his capacity and effort”.⁴³

Rationality as Coherence

The move from reason and rationality to moral behavior and back is a recurrent theme in the Qur’an and forms the basis of the Islamic ethical tradition. Reason, when properly cultivated, leads to moral action; moral behavior, in turn, nurtures reason. The Qur’an considers this simple syllogism to be self-evident because it is a contradiction to accept something as right and true and then not act accordingly. So is hypocrisy: “Do you order other people to be righteous and forget yourselves while you recite the Scripture? Will you, then, not reason?” (2:44). The Qur’an condemns hypocrisy as much as disbelief and in some cases more so because hypocrisy, besides being a failure of the human will, breaks the logical connection between reason and morality and thus lands us in incoherence. “O you who have believed, why do you say what you do not do? It is most hateful in the sight of God that you say that which you do not do” (61:2–3).

The same principle of coherence applies to belief in God. The cosmological verses in the Qur’an, which give vivid descriptions of how God has created the universe and the human being, make a strong case for rationality as coherence because all of them without exception speak to the human reason to make the logical connection between a universe so miraculously ordered and well-functioning and the belief in the Creator who created it. Those who take partners unto God, while believing in His existence, contradict themselves. Believing in God and not heeding His guidance presents a clear case of incoherence.

The following verses, while emphasizing God’s infinite mercy in creating and caring for humankind, challenge the internal inconsistency of taking partners unto God (*shirk*), which is the greatest sin, and declare it to be utter irrationality. Those who think, ponder, and use their reason have no difficulty in recognizing God as He deserves to be recognized.

And who other than Him created the heavens and the earth and sent down for you water from the sky, whereby We cause to grow lush orchards; for it is not up to you to cause their trees to grow! Is there, then, a god besides God? Yet these are the people who ascribe partners to Him.

And who other than Him made the earth a firm abode [for you], and set rivers traversing through it, and put firm mountains therein and sealed off one sea from the other? Is there, then, a god besides God? Indeed, most of them do not know.

And who other than Him responds to the distressed one when he calls Him and He relieves him of the distress, and who has made you [mankind] His vicegerents on earth? Is there, then, a god besides God? Little do you reflect!

And who other than Him guides you in the darkness of the land and the sea? And who sends forth winds heralding His mercy? Is there, then, a god besides God? Far exalted is He above what they associate with Him!

⁴³ Ibn Miskawayh, *The Refinement of Character*, 44. He goes on to say that “the proper food of the rational soul is knowledge, the acquisition of intelligibles, the practice of veracity in one’s opinions, the acceptance of truth no matter where or with whom it may be, and the shunning of falsehood and lying whatever it may be or whence it may come”.

And who other than Him brings forth His creation and then re-creates it? And who gives you sustenance from the heaven and the earth? Is there, then, a god besides God? Say [O Muhammad!]: “Bring your proof if you are right [in associating others with God].” (27:60–4)

These verses reveal a strongly argumentative approach and underlie the Qur'an's insistence on coherence as a basis for a proper discourse about the relationship between man and God on the one hand, and God and the universe on the other. Rationality as coherence means that we draw the correct conclusions from the correct premises. Considering the continuity of our ontological and moral presuppositions, this suggests that our empirical observations about the universe lead to their logical conclusion in a theistic context, namely, accepting God as God and acting accordingly. The Qur'an makes profuse use of this procedural notion of rationality and applies it to cosmological, theological, and legal issues. In its numerous confrontations with the Meccan pagans, the Qur'an challenges them to think for themselves and see if their misguided thinking about God makes any sense. A rationally coherent notion of God and the universe can be obtained through correct thinking if we can use our reason cogently to read the signs in the “visible world”.

Conclusion: Is Return to Reason Still Possible?

As I have argued so far, rationality as intelligibility moves us beyond the internal workings of a single, disengaged mind and places us within a larger context of ontological significance. The metaphysics of creation establishes the Qur'anic notion of substantive rationality derived from the intrinsic intelligibility of the realm of existence. Knowledge as the disclosure of the inherent order and structure of things rejects instrumentalist and subjectivist rationality and instead sets up a context of intelligibility in which our reason and thinking function as a response to the call of reality. The ontological ground of reason enables it to participate in the intelligible order of existence and thus makes it a situated and contextualized reality. Furthermore, reason is also an inter-subjective principle and does not function in a solipsistic environment.

As a book of revelation and guidance, the Qur'an treats human reason and thinking in this larger context of the created order of existence. While having full confidence in uncorrupted reason, it warns against ontological reductionism, epistemological hubris, and moral egotism. Reason is a God-given gift with which we access the reality of things. But it is unreasonable to claim that reason alone can give us meaning and freedom. One also needs spiritual guidance through which reason is to be illuminated. The heart as our deep conscience guarantees that procedural rationality, which we employ in our daily dealings, does not trump other types of reasoning and thinking. Reason nourished by faith gains a deeper insight into the reality of things because it can set its own limits and finds its proper place in the “circle of existence” (*da'irat al-wujud*). Faith articulated by reason and communicated through language can bring about certainty (*al-yaqin*), which the Qur'an deems essential for our mental and spiritual integrity (see 6:75; 102:5–7).

Recovering the Qur'anic path of thinking and the traditional meaning of *'aql* is an urgent task for the contemporary Muslim world. This is a task that extends to such diverse fields as law, education, art, science, and politics and certainly not limited to the interests and aspirations of Muslim nations alone. The erosion of the principle of reason in late modernity has hurt human aspirations globally to create a world based on reason, justice, and equality. The vacuum created by the failure of the Enlightenment reason has been filled with the new

forces of global hyper-capitalism, a culture of nihilism and narcissism, and scientific hubris. As the main terms of reference of the new global order, productivity, profit, and efficiency now define what it means to live a rational life both individually and communally. The current world order creates new definitions of rationality and reasonableness through an increasingly sophisticated system of public discourse, mass education, technological innovation, instant communication, and the hourly creation of countless virtual worlds, all of which give the appearance that our search for meaning has ended and that we as rational and free human beings have finally created a purely human world free from unjustified beliefs and transcendent illusions.

Philosophically speaking, the inherent contradiction of rationalism is that it assumes its own ontological ground and reproduces reality in such a way as to justify a self-referential notion of human reason. Neither reality nor reason, however, warrants a self-grounding reason. Reason by nature and function operates with terms and tools both within and outside itself. As a principle of “tying together”, “gathering”, and “protecting”, reason always reaches out beyond itself and connects us with the larger reality of existence and human language. Pure rationalism ends up in radical solipsism and thus contradicts reason.

Reason as a self-grounded principle cannot move us beyond the current state of humanity; it only reinforces and reproduces its metaphysical fallacies. A humanity so deeply enclosed upon itself to be the master of the universe while not taking the moral responsibility that comes with such a claim has created a world in which the principle of reason has disappeared, subjective consciousness has been absolutized, and a profound alienation between the human person and his work has set in. The more we reduce everything to utility and maximize the use-value of whatever happens to be around us, the more we lose the chance to retain the meaning of Logos as connecting different orders of reality and protecting ourselves from error.

A new concept of reason is thus needed to recover the meaning of the human person as a “being who thinks” (*haywan natiq*), who sees, hears, listens, encounters, responds, reacts, contemplates, and engages in other acts of human intelligence and will, and never loses sight of the larger reality of which he or she is a part. Such a recovery is possible but it requires a re-assessment of the key notions and values with which we operate today. Reason as tying together, connecting, and protecting will re-emerge only when we remember that reason is not about the human person or his interests or even his reasoning but rather about existence and beings, their meaning, relations and connections, and about the ways in which we respond to the call of reality.

“Say: [Know] then, that the final evidence [of all truth] rests with God alone.” (6:149)



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MONOGRAPH NO. 10

REASON AND RATIONALITY IN THE QUR'AN
BY IBRAHIM KALIN

The world is indeed intelligible to the human being, and the Qur'an continuously invites the reader to the spiritual, moral, and intellectual journey to discover that intelligibility. This is the main thrust of Ibrahim Kalin's argument in his *Reason and Rationality in the Qur'an*. In contrast to modern theories of rationalism, this essay maintains that the ontological foundations of rationality subsume reason within the larger context of existence. God creates with meaning, purpose, and comprehensibility, and it is thus that the universe becomes known to us. The Qur'an considers human reason as part of a larger reality whose meaning cannot be unveiled or encapsulated by logical analysis, conceptual abstraction, or rational discourse alone. The message of the Qur'an is one of timeless wisdom, and that reality is beyond all logical, theoretical, and intellectual constraints.



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